

Article

When Everyone Wins: Dialogue, Play, and Black History for Critical Games Education

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Abstract

In this article, we reflect on the process and outcomes of using dialogue, play, and a focus on Black women’s history to support critical media literacy in game design education. Over three years we developed a dialogue-based introductory undergraduate course in the game design program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute intended to deepen engagement by students in game design practice. We specifically focused on critical approaches to explore the history and culture of games, utilizing dialogic pedagogy to develop transformative learning environments rooted in social justice education, and helped students develop skills for intercultural dialogue and communicating “across difference.” The dialogue experience created a powerful learning environment that resulted in higher quality and more critical student game design work. This was evident in the 2019 iteration of the course, which included two sections of students and in which we had a semester-long group project on the history of Harriet Tubman, culminating in a selection of student games being shown at a local gallery in an exhibition celebrating Tubman’s legacy. The Tubman project was liberatory not only for students, but also instructors, as we learned together how to navigate discomfort and gain a more critical understanding of the material realities of white supremacy in games, self, and each other. This article shares details from the design and methodology of our course, outcomes as evidenced by student work, survey responses, and instructor observations, and concludes with reflections on areas for further research and opportunities for other educators to incorporate new methods in design education.

Keywords

Black history; critical media literacy; dialogue; games; pedagogy; play

Issue

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1. Introduction

In this article, we reflect on the process and outcomes of using dialogue, multipartial facilitation, and engagement with historical material, specifically Harriet Tubman’s story, to deepen critical and anti-racist pedagogy in game design education. In terms of media literacy, our approach was three-fold: increase student awareness of their own and others’ subject positions in relation to media and society; support student skill development in game analysis as a “reading” media skill; and support student skill development in game design as a media

“writing” ability. To work toward these goals, we collaborated for over three years together at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, where we developed a dialogue-based introductory undergraduate course in the game simulation arts and sciences program: The course was called History and Culture of Games (Rouse & Corron, 2020). What initially began as a dialogue workshop series sprinkled throughout the course, grew into a fully co-facilitated class rooted and immersed in dialogic pedagogy. The class experiences shared in this article are from our final experience co-facilitating the class together. Throughout our collaboration, we specifically

focused on critical approaches to explore the history and culture of games, utilizing dialogic pedagogy based on intergroup dialogue to develop transformative learning environments rooted in social justice education, and helped students develop skills for intercultural dialogue and communicating “across difference” (Zúñiga, 2003). Through the application of the four stages of intergroup dialogue, students learned dialogue skills while building a brave classroom space (Arao & Clemens, 2013) where they could share and design vulnerably and take risks in learning about social identities and dialoguing about issues of power, privilege, and oppression as they related to games and the practice of game design.

Intergroup dialogue is a communication practice characterized by sustained face-to-face facilitated conversations between individuals who share two or more different social identities (Zúñiga, 2003). Through personal storytelling, active listening, and affirmative inquiry, dialogue seeks to build an understanding of one’s own and others’ perspectives on issues, and an appreciation of life experiences that created those perspectives (Nagda & Maxwell, 2011). Intergroup dialogue engages both cognitive and emotional learning with a focus on experiential learning activities to encourage participants to reflect deeply about themselves and those who share different social identities, about the realities of dominant narratives and the cycles of socialization they have been a part of their whole lives, and tools to enact change towards social justice. Dialogue participants also often make close bonds with one another given the unique classroom community that is created through the four stages of dialogue, and the vulnerability and mutual trust that is built into the space. Many participants share that intergroup dialogue experiences are life-changing and transformational, both in terms of developing self-awareness and more meaningful connection with other people.

Dialogue facilitators aim to utilize multipartial facilitation and power balancing facilitation techniques (Fisher & Petryk, 2017) to build awareness of how dominant narratives are operating within dialogue while inviting participants to share counter-narratives that do not fit within the dominant narratives to build understanding across the group of a variety of lived experiences. The goal of multipartial facilitation is to elevate and make space for these counter-narratives, often shared by those who hold marginalized identities and push against the dominant narrative while not refuting those who believe the dominant narrative or whose experiences fit within the dominant narrative (Fisher & Petryk, 2017). By validating lived experiences and utilizing multipartial facilitation versus other facilitation techniques, such as neutral or advocacy facilitation, dialogue participants remain open to sharing their own experiences and understanding experiences that are different from their own; that further complicate and question the dominant narratives they may have come to believe. Our dialogic pedagogy approach is different from some more conventional

lecture- and assignment-based approaches, as ours is process-based and framed as part of a life-long learning (or un-learning) process that has an end goal far beyond the outcomes of any single academic course. The ultimate goal of dialogic pedagogy is transformational, as opposed to informational. The single course we offered was intended as the catalyst of a transformational process, opening ourselves and students to understanding across differences. Therefore, as we reflect on our dialogue experience in this course and what it means to have been successful, we find many different definitions and versions of success, since our students were all in various stages of this transformational learning process and had different, unique, and meaningful learning moments where they created a greater understanding of themselves, others, and the dominant narratives they critically explored within games. As David Bohm characterizes the process of dialogue:

In a dialogue, however, nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is a different sort of spirit to it. In a dialogue, there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view prevail. Rather, whenever any mistake is discovered on the part of anybody, everybody gains. It’s a situation called win-win, whereas the other game is a win-lose—if I win, you lose. But a dialogue is something more of a common participation in which we are not playing a game against each other, but with each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins. (Bohm, 2004, p. 7).

Because dialogue seeks to engage the student as a whole person, in a manner that values the inherent diversity across individuals, it follows that every student’s experience and outcomes in the course will be diverse as well. Even the process of producing artifacts we might deem less conventionally successful in a course represents a kind of success within the dialogic frame, where any learning is understood as valuable if it meets the individual student and classroom community where they are authentic. In our final in-class dialogue reflecting together on the process of the course, as students thanked each other and shared their perception of an increased feeling of classroom community through dialogue, one student who had struggled with engagement during the course offered his gratitude about “learning patience with others and himself, big emotions, and self-awareness.” This final reflection exemplifies Bohm’s radical perspective that “everybody wins when anyone wins” (Bohm, 2004, p. 7).

In this specific iteration of the course, the figure of Harriet Tubman served as a powerful catalyst in terms of expanding the bounds of what a game could be and how a player could exist in relation to a game, pushing beyond the notion of games as “just for fun” into critical engagement and even discomfort. In parallel with smaller design assignments and in-class gameplay with

reflective dialogues, students participated in a semester-long small group project, designing games focused on Harriet Tubman's life and legacy. Centering the course around the figure of Harriet Tubman emerged organically from a long-term collaboration with a colleague at a neighboring university, Professor Janell Hobson, who is a cultural theorist and historian, and a Tubman expert. The move to center Black history and Black female experience in a game design course is not a common practice. While the field of Black games studies is growing considerably, with important contributions from scholars such as DePass (2018), Gray (2020), and Grace (2021), Black designers have also written astute critiques of design pedagogy as too often subjecting students of color to violent erasures (Jones, 2022), and have noted the radical potentials of having design students examine their own identities critically as a way to build the capacity to envision equality (Gaiter, 2022).

We open with an excerpt of our observations during an in-class dialogue session, from one of the two course sections, from the twenty-third of the twenty-nine course meetings in the semester. We have anonymized this student dialogue to maintain student privacy, but have shared basic information about core aspects of students' social identities such as race and gender. These components of intersectional identity (and others) were brought into the class and highlighted in earlier dialogues and activities by the students themselves, and therefore formed an ongoing and important context to the dialogue as the semester continued. In addition, part of the work of multipartial facilitation of dialogue is to attend to who is speaking, as much as to what is said, and to try to disrupt power imbalances that may emerge which reflect dominant power structures (ie., which often function to silence women, people of color, queer people, disabled people). This disruption is created by stepping back from dialogue to reflect, as a group, on the process of the dialogue—evaluate it—and by facilitators working to support students' development of skills in either making or taking space, to work toward more equitable dialogue. Because of this, facilitators need to be mindful of the intersectional identities held by the dialogue participants. In this example dialogue, nineteen students, mostly first-semester freshmen in a game design program, sat in a classroom, gathered around a large square configuration of tables, facing each other. Two instructors provided an opening prompt for the dialogue, but then mostly listened, recording observations in notebooks, striving to observe both the students and themselves without judgment and at the same time maintain responsibility for holding the space for the students' dialogue together. The prompt for this session was: What have you learned from games about your social identity? A record of this session follows:

After some silence, a white male student points out that "identities are shifting in different play communities. Our identity is not always the same." Another

white male student observes that "games are a socialization tool because we rarely play alone." A Black female student brings up the idea of what players choose to share versus not share, referencing Anita Sarkeesian's experience in GamerGate (Sarkeesian & Cross, 2015), the impulse to share less after experiencing harassment, such as not using the microphone in multiplayer games. A second female student, who is white, shares that she is "not into multiplayer partly due to the misogyny" and that when she passes for male online, she does not correct this misapprehension, explaining that "the default is male," not only in character creators but also on Discord, and [that] "the energy of explaining who you really are is just too much." An Asian male student observes that even having a default is all part of a gender binary worldview. A third female student, who is also white, explains she is not surprised by any of this, she says she feels desensitized because misogyny is just the norm. A white nonbinary student says: "The platform you're given in games isn't for you to speak, it is for you to continue to be harassed." The white female student who shared her experiences passing as male chimes in again, asking: "Who carries the burden of change?" [She] references chapters by J. T. Lee and Shaana Bryant in Tanya DePass's collection, which touches on this issue, highlighting the struggles of those in the game industry who, due to their social identities, must work to succeed "despite everything." In particular, she brings up Bryant's call to allies, to "please don't let that [racist microaggressions and harassment] stand" and stop giving the benefit of the doubt to the offender. The dialogue ends with a Hispanic male student bringing up the difficulty of changing the game, even in the case of the card game activity we had played in our own classroom.

As instructors committed to a dialogue-based pedagogy, with the larger aim of guiding students toward more critical literacies regarding games and game culture, we experienced this dialogue as a clear success (this type of clear success is not always the outcome in a dialogue-based pedagogy; as we will share below, success comes in many forms in dialogue, and some may be more difficult to recognize). In this example, students displayed their ability to listen and share "across difference." Students acknowledged their intersectional entanglement with games, society, and each other, and displayed a willingness to ask difficult questions—not as a means to an end or a singular answer, but as a way to open up complexity within the game as a medium and examine this together. As opposed to more instrumentalized forms of pedagogy, our assessment and outcomes are not focused on the evaluation of something our students produce as an end in itself (a research paper, a project, etc.). Instead, we are observing for evidence of deep connections within the group, between the students, and between students and the complexity of the subject.

In this course we combined both dialogic pedagogy and more traditional design pedagogy methods to work across personal experience, theory, and practice, to build an integrative critical literacy for students, inclusive of their own social identities. Evidence of this critical literacy, to the differing degrees it was achieved, was seen in student dialogues, written analyses of games, and the quality of the games students designed for the course. By literacy, then, we refer not only to the ability to critically and carefully “read” and interpret games, but also the ability to “write” in the medium of the game with a critical perspective that moves beyond replication of dominant games artifacts, and includes a reflexive understanding of the self in relation to others in the mediascape of today’s culture and society. In developing complex design tasks for our students that have no single “right answer” or “best practice” to rely on, we aim to support students in developing critical literacies that are up to the task of navigating real-world complexity. Our approach is in line with prior research on feminist and critical approaches to teaching media literacies, as discussed by Lund et al. (2019) and Bali (2019). Like Lund et al. (2019, p. 56), who also make a compelling case for the need for digital literacy pedagogies to foster student agency and engage with complexity by providing students with “open-ended tasks and fuzzy problems which lend themselves to collaborative inquiry,” we too presented students with complex design assignments to be developed via iteration collaboratively. As with Bali, we worked to first support students’ self-awareness of the complexity of their own intersectional social identities and then support awareness of the self in relation to others. Like Bali, we too utilized a dialogic pedagogy to achieve this foundational step. Bali, however, used a web-based intercultural dialogue program (Soliya Connect) while we worked with an in-person intergroup dialogue practice, paired with related experiential learning activities, often in the form of games.

2. Course Structure and Experiential Learning Strategies

While our class was not fully structured as a true intergroup dialogue, we utilized dialogic pedagogy in our course structure and facilitation, with an emphasis on experiential learning activities that were often rooted in games. In Figure 1 we illustrate the four stages of dialogue and the experiential learning activities, as well as the games-related activities we engaged in throughout each stage. Dialogue is sequenced, and the different stages and activities built on each other as we developed our classroom community and expanded our understanding of dialogue, social identities, and social justice in relation to games. The deep engagement in the first two stages, in particular, created a sense of mutual trust that led to the ability for students to share their own experiences vulnerably in dialogues that occurred in later stages in the semester.

We opened the course by acknowledging how our structure, approach, and aims differ from other dominant pedagogical methods, sharing with the students that we seek a deeper engagement with the complexity of games in culture via the communication mode of dialogue. We were also certain that the course and the material would invite students into the classroom in a more personal way than other courses might commonly do. To begin the larger journey with a small initial step, we invited students to share their earliest game memories. We did not specify if this should be a digital or analog game, only that the memory should be from childhood or earlier youth. We combined this first interaction of sharing from personal experience as valuable knowledge with learning each other’s names, and the process of creating a community agreement about what qualities of communication were desired by the group. These qualities were written on a large sheet of paper that was brought back into the class during each dialogue session and revisited for revision if needed. In reflecting on sharing these early game memories, we examined this very personal “data set” for insights about connections and distinctions between each students’ early experiences of games, play, game culture, and games in culture.

We utilized class sessions at the beginning of the course to create a shared meaning of dialogue and learn specific dialogue skills, as well as explore social identities, reflect on our own salient social identities, and work towards understanding identities from those who are different from us. Engaging in experiential learning activities on these topics during Stages 1 and 2 in the first six weeks of the course helped foster a classroom community built on trust, and helped students develop dialogic communication skills, such as active listening and affirming inquiry that they could use throughout our semester during in-class dialogues.

As we approached Stage 3 of the intergroup dialogue model, we specifically focused on understanding privilege and oppression, and embedded power structures within games. Using power balancing multipartial facilitation (Fisher & Petryk, 2017), we co-facilitated class dialogues throughout the second part of the course where students could explore a variety of identity-based topics in games, and share vulnerably and authentically their own lived experiences in relation to the dialogue. We specifically explored the *Cycle of Socialization* (Harro, 2018) and the socialized knowledge we developed about our own identities from games. We also had many dialogues about the dominant narratives present in games, such as colonialism, militarism, racism, and sexism, and critically reflected on those narratives—who they served, who was missing from them, and how they perpetuated systems of marginalization.

We closed the course experience on Stage 4, thinking about future commitments to further social justice within games and processing impacts and takeaways from our community dialogue experience. Dialogues in this later stage focused on the inherent power of being



Description of Stage	Establishing a foundation for dialogue through community building, laying the foundation of collective trust such that the classroom is constructed as a welcoming space where all are invited to bring their whole selves in, and exploring dialogic communication tools and skills.	Building an understanding of social identities, individuals' salient social identities, and sharing across different social identities. Begin to explore histories of marginalization and conflict related to different identity groups, and examine dominant narratives in games that uphold systems of power, privilege, and oppression	Further exploration of privilege and oppression —reflection on lived experiences and connections to games. Critical investigation of embedded power systems within games and games' participation in cycles of socialization and systems of marginalization.	Reflection and ownership of inherent power as a game designer and developer. Community commitments to addressing systemic inequality in games. Community closing with sharing of main takeaways and impacts participants had on one another.
Activities	Community Agreements, Dialogue Visualization, Debate vs Discussion vs. Dialogue, Commitments to Risk-Taking in Learning, Active Listening & LARA	Social Identity Terminology, Social Identity Profiles, Cycle of Socialization, Social Identity Timelines	Hot Topics Dialogues on Issues of Identity & Games	Spheres of Influence, Closing Dialogue — Impacts & Takeaways
Games	Learning Edges	Sim City	Barnga & the Power of Rules	Memoir Games

Figure 1. The four stages of dialogue as implemented in our courses.

a game designer, what it means to tell someone else's story, and critically reflecting on the current dominant narratives and harmful exclusionary norms in the professional field of game development. We aimed to empower students to enact future change in their spheres of influence, and think about how they could apply their takeaways from the course to future experiences in the games field. In our closing dialogue, we asked students to share their biggest takeaways and meaningful learning moments of the course, as well as an individual who had the greatest impact on them through dialogue. These closing reflections featured immense gratitude shared between those in the classroom community and were deeply reflective.

Throughout the course curriculum and application of the four stages of intergroup dialogue, we utilized experiential learning activities, some of which were rooted in games. These activities further intermeshed dialogue and course content related to the history and culture of games. In the first week of the course, we did a "learning edges" activity that asks students to reflect on their level of comfort related to different social identity-based scenarios, and physically place themselves on a spectrum of comfort zone—learning edge—danger zone. This

was a physical activity, reminiscent of playground games like Red Rover, in which students moved their bodies to different areas on a spectrum according to their comfort with a specific prompt. The activity was done in silence, however, students were able to observe where their peers were moving to and sometimes altered their responses based on others' movements. We processed this activity in-depth, thinking about indicators of discomfort, the reasons why individuals may have had different responses, when and why individuals changed their responses, etc. This activity is a foundational part of Stage 1 of dialogue, where we are laying the foundation of learning through discomfort and recognizing our individual learning edges. Here we introduce students to the practice of reflecting critically on the play process, not only the outcomes of the game.

As we progressed to explore social identity and difference, we did an activity called "Sim City," a simulation in which students build and create a city. Beforehand, students have been split into four different groups (usually identified by some type of fruit), and the facilitators take on different city administrative roles, such as mayor, city council, and police officers. The city space was laid out ahead of time with tape on the floor, with

some groups having much larger spaces to work with than others, and others situated adjacent to a jail and a trash dump. While students initially treated the activity as a creative design task, making buildings and city infrastructure with craft supplies similar to the world-building assignments they worked on in other game design courses, they quickly found out that the purpose of the simulation was to emulate systems of marginalization, as each group was given different amounts of resources and treated very differently throughout the simulation. Processing the “Sim City” simulation experience brought out varied responses, with some students critically reflecting on systems of privilege and oppression, while others related more to how the activity connected to the concept of “gaming” a system. Some students did not connect deeply, instead applying an instrumentalist or commercial games view of the activity as a “bad game,” since it was not designed to maximize industrial concepts focused on in other courses such as flow, immersion, and replayability.

In a later session, to further explore power and dominant narratives, we used a card game called *Barnge* (Thiagarajan, 2006). In this game, students were split into small groups, given instructions on how to play, and told that they would play a tournament-style rotation. After the instructions, students were no longer permitted to talk. Following each timed round, winners and losers would move into different playing groups. What the students came to find out was that while the game mechanics remained the same, each small group was given a different set of rules (different suits were trump, different cards were high vs. low, etc.). This led to initial confusion and frustration as students moved between groups, and found they did not know the rules to effectively play the game. Learning connections emerged including reflection on the power of rules specifically in games, and then more broadly in terms of knowing and being able to operate within social rules and dominant narratives in different cultural contexts.

Lastly, towards the end of the course, the final game design assignment had students create a memoir game focused on specific social identities and/or lived experiences. The assignment was open in letting students choose what kind of game they wanted to design, and how they wanted to share their story with others. Some final designs had the player adopt the student’s point of view, while others depicted the students’ experiences as narrative. Modes of design included digital games, card games, and cooperative games. By completing this assignment towards the end of the course after having established a trusting and authentic classroom community, many students chose to share more personal and vulnerable experiences in their memoir games, also illustrating insights from our multiple dialogues on social identities and games. For example, one student shared her experiences as a bisexual Black woman through a digital game that had the player adopt her point of view as she navigated her identity development. Another stu-

dent illustrated how he processed the transition and feelings of loss when his older brother went to college through a digital game as well.

Even with the application of the intentional sequential stages of dialogue and the use of experiential learning activities and games throughout the course, as well as integration in design assignments, not all students were able to deeply engage the critical concepts we were asking them to reflect on. In contrast to the clearly successful dialogue presented above, we had a number of dialogue experiences that were more challenging and included resistance. These too, however, present opportunities for successful learning when characterized through the lens of dialogue. As a contrasting example, we share another excerpt of our observations of an in-class dialogue that occurred in the second section of the course in response to the same prompt shared earlier: What have you learned from games about your social identity?

The class appears stumped by the prompt and asks for further clarification. Three white students, two men and one woman, share that games are “just fun” and that they choose not to unpack them in the way that the prompt is suggesting. The facilitators ask the students to reflect further in small groups, which many do, but one white male student leaves the classroom and does not return for a quarter of an hour. Bringing the small groups back together, the facilitators present the prompt a second time to the large group. Multiple students, both women and men, share the white, cis-gendered, heteronormative male dominant narrative and norms present particularly in digital games. A group of male Chinese students voice a different perspective, sharing the experiences of prejudice and harassment they have faced playing online multiplayer games, encountering anti-Chinese racism in games, where Chinese players are cast as cheaters and toxic by white or other English-speaking players. A male Brazilian student shares that he has encountered language prejudice in games too, and negotiates this by choosing which language to speak according to which country’s server he logs into. The group still shares a general consensus and acceptance that this is just how things are and that change would be far too difficult, or even impossible to achieve. There is a lack of engagement and energy to go deeper and consider ways to enact change, and some students even critique those who have tried to change game culture. A white male student references the readings from Anita Sarkeesian and Katherine Cross (Sarkeesian & Cross, 2015) and suggests that women who are harassed in online multiplayer games “should just use the mute button” instead of being so “harsh” in their response to harassment.

Similarly, in other dialogues throughout the course, there were multiple critiques and expressions of resistance

by students towards the experiential learning activities and games we had students play throughout the course. We share an excerpt of our class dialogue processing the “Sim City” activity:

Multiple students call the activity a “bad game” due to its educational nature and lack of replayability. Some students share reflections focused on the feelings they experienced while in their different socially stratified groups, including pain and discomfort in recognizing privilege. One white male student shares: “It hurts me to think society is like this because I am privileged.” Even with these reflections, the majority of the students share takeaways connected to dominant narratives in digital game culture such as the need for the game to be entertaining, promote enjoyment and fun, and not cause negative feelings.

Our student reactions and lack of critical engagement observed in our class dialogues shared here were reminiscent of Wu’s (2022) pedagogical encounters with structural whiteness in the games classroom. Most notably, we resonated with her following reaction to resistance she experienced in her classes: “I was unnerved by how viscerally aggressive they were towards announcing the illegitimacy of anything illegible to them. I was unnerved by how nonchalantly easy it was for them to withdraw when the conversation gets difficult” (Wu, 2022, p. 9). As facilitators, we were similarly charged by our students’ dismissals, lack of engagement, and resistance to learning through discomfort when considering new critical perspectives. Yet, through these difficulties the frame of dialogue provided us with a lens to understand these failed or stunted dialogues as valuable learning experiences too, both for ourselves and the students, and reflective of the reality of our students’ experiences and positionings.

This struggle between resistance and more engaged participation was further exemplified in our semester-long board game design assignment focused on the life and legacy of Harriet Tubman. Like our class dialogues, we observed both instances of clear success as well as resistance in student engagement in this assignment throughout the course. We will examine how, through dialogue, we were able to critically assess relevant examples of games about slavery, process our ongoing discomfort with confronting racism and white supremacy within game design, and consider how exploring history and celebrating marginalized stories through games and impactful play can be important parts of liberation, leading toward the goals of social justice.

3. Tubman in Play

For the fall 2019 iteration of the course, we included a semester-long small group design assignment with a focus on telling the fuller story of Harriet Tubman through games, for an exhibition at a local art gallery.

In parallel, author Rebecca had been involved in a two-year collaboration with Professor Janell Hobson, who is a Black feminist theorist and a Harriet Tubman expert. Hobson had approached Rouse about a collaboration with a different course, AR Design for Cultural Heritage, for which Rouse’s students had developed prototype AR and immersive applications focused on Tubman for a local science museum in 2018. The 2019 iteration of the History and Culture of Games course coincided with the 170th anniversary of Tubman’s self-liberation from slavery in the fall of 1849. This exhibition brought together student work on Harriet Tubman from a range of undergraduate programs at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (games, music, sculpture) and a graduate course collaboration between SUNY Albany and Albany Law School on race, rape culture, and law. While Tubman has good name recognition in the US context, there is commonly a lack of deeper understanding of her history, who she was, and her significance. For the exhibition, our students first researched Tubman’s history and legacy and then designed playable games intended to help tell her story in more depth.

In these critical dialogues, we also looked with honesty at the brutality of slavery to educate about history that should be more widely known than it is. We added reading materials to the course bibliography that focused on Tubman and representations of slavery in games, such as Kate Clifford Larson’s 2004 biography of Tubman, Sarah Bradford’s 1869 book on Tubman written during Tubman’s lifetime, and Sarah Juliet Lauro’s 2020 research on portrayals of slavery and slave resistance in games. Bringing together student engagement with historical materials, as well as critical reflections on representations of slavery in games, were both important components of the initial design process and led to some interesting and meaningful game topics and mechanics that honored Harriet Tubman and her experiences. Looking back, we can see the myriad ways that bringing the figure of Harriet Tubman into our course functioned as a generative and critical catalyst, pushing the “buttons” of the field in meaningful ways that we believe led to some of our students developing work that was highly original and deeply engaged Tubman’s story, while others struggled.

Utilizing dialogue also was an effective method to critically engage students in a historical review of games about slavery that are problematic and perpetuate dominant narratives of racism and white supremacy. Games analyzed in class included: Brenda Romero’s *The New World* (2008), *Playing History: Slave Trade* (2013), *Mission US: Flight to Freedom* (2012), *National Geographic’s Underground Railroad: Journey to Freedom* (2014), *Scholastic’s The Underground Railroad: Escape From Slavery* (2013), and Brian Meyer’s *Freedom: The Underground Railroad* (2012). By using multiparticipatory facilitation, we were able to deeply explore why some of these games had negative impacts while others were more successful, looking at the ways that they

characterized slavery in the US in their depiction, design, game mechanics, etc., moving beyond just telling students “these games are bad” or “good.” For example, in analyzing the 2012 board game *Freedom* by Brian Mayer, which is a good-faith attempt to represent the experience of escaping on the underground railroad and is packed with historical educational material, we could also identify how it falls short in the affective experience of the game, as it is highly proceduralized in the manner of a resource management game, thus encouraging an intellectualizing mode of play. We looked too at very poor examples, such as the infamous 2013 *Playing History: Slave Trade* videogame, sometimes referred to as *slave Tetris*, which we examined as a racist misuse of games’ ability to make meaning from mechanics, a quality known as “procedural rhetoric.” In this game, players stack slave avatars into a slave ship in the same manner as blocks are stacked in the puzzle game *Tetris*. While the game developers had said the dehumanization was intentional on their part, to emphasize the brutality of slavery, we talked about the inappropriateness of placing the player in the role of the racist oppressor in a game in which pleasure could potentially be derived from succeeding in the puzzle task. Likewise, we discussed the shortcomings of the “empathy machine” perspective in games and interactive tech, pointing out how players inhabiting the identities of oppressed peoples can also serve to reinscribe harm and fall far short of liberating claims often made for such works (Rouse, 2021; Ruberg, 2020). Examining this variety of game examples together helped to open up dialogue around the nature of the game designer’s responsibility, socially and politically, as well as tensions around who has the right to tell another’s story, and the potential of games to aid in anti-racist and liberatory teaching. We started with class dialogues on games about slavery to explore in the game design process how to honor Harriet Tubman and create affective games that more vividly illustrated the humanity of enslaved people, which had not been done previously.

Ultimately, four of the eight student games designed in small groups were selected for inclusion into the public exhibition: *Guided*, *Combahee*, *Safehouse*, and *Family or Foe?* (see Figure 2). This “success rate” of 50% felt like an accurate reflection of the many ways in which our course in this specific iteration touched on many of the key shortcomings in the games field and pushed against design conventions and standards of practice that are prejudicial and racist in games. It made sense that despite our dialogic pedagogy approach, not all students were able to successfully create original and meaningful games on the topic of Tubman. Students whose work was not of the quality to be included in the exhibition had struggled with finding a connection to the Tubman topic, reflecting the dominant view in games that many areas of culture are “outside the purview of games,” or that games are “just for fun” and should not spoil that “fun” with serious topics (of course, we can

also reflect on who is welcomed into the fun of commercial games and who is excluded). The teams that created successful games found a way to bring genuine engagement and curiosity to the story of Tubman, were open to receiving constructive feedback on improving their designs, and worked to fabricate their games to a higher level of polish or completion.

While we are sharing the final designs of the games selected for the exhibition, the focus of our course was more process related versus design or production related. We utilized game design assignments, and this Harriet Tubman project in particular, to engage students more deeply in the process of dialogue in relation to the history and culture of games and critical game design practice.

4. Conclusion

Looking back on the experience of this course two years later, we also reached out to former students and asked for their longer-term reflections, to help assess the longitudinal impact of the course. Two students responded, each from one of the two course sections. The different perspectives they shared exemplify the diversity in experience of the course. Sarah, who is a Black female student shared:

Being a Black student in a white-dominated field like the games industry is already alienating, so I didn’t want to contribute to mishandling a game surrounding one of the world’s most renowned Black historical figures....That intersection of history, social issues, and thought-provoking conversation, in my opinion, is greatly overlooked and underrepresented in the game industry at large. In class, dialogues that brought up potentially challenging points of discussion sometimes felt cathartic—and were, at other times, somewhat frustrating. We as students engaged in conversations that we typically avoided in day-to-day interactions, making the discussions all the more impactful. I became more aware of my peers’ perspectives and, in part, how their backgrounds informed their ideologies.

Sarah’s response illustrates the purpose, value, and impact of engaging in dialogue and centering a historical Black figure by focusing on Tubman throughout our course. Another student, Matthew, who is a white male student, shared:

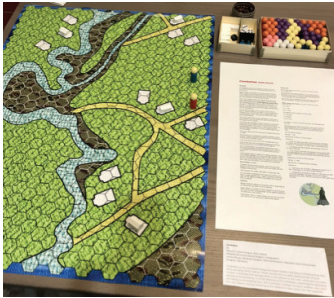
Being a dialogue-based course [it] took some time to acclimate to. However, it encouraged student engagement, resulting in us having to reflect and think more about the material taught instead of us just listening to the professor....After creating my group’s board game...the bigger takeaway would be learning about the Combahee River Raid and Harriet Tubman’s role as the leader of the Union troops in this raid. When



Guided

By Sarah E. Mirekua, Hibiki Takaku & Justing Hung

In *Guided*, players take on the role of runaways and Conductors on the Underground Railroad. Playing off of oral tradition, music, and the safety provided by the cover of night the Conductor must come up with a code, pass it on to the player, and use the code to help the blindfolded runaway reach Freedom. With the blindfold simulating night and the musical codes guiding the player, *Guided* aims to simulate the experience of escape using cooperation and basic memorization.



Combahee

By Max Lico, Matthew Bonnacaze, Jenifer Monger & Sean Orelup

Combahee is a 1v1, turn-based strategy board game based on the famous Combahee River Raid, which was led by Harriet Tubman. Players traverse the accurately scaled portrayal of South Carolina's Combahee River and play either on the offensive as the Union, whose goal is to storm and destroy the plantations, or on the defensive as the Confederacy, protecting their plantations and stalling out the attacking force. With *Combahee's* multiple unit types, modifiers, and a strict time limit, players must use everything at their disposal to claim victory over their opponent.



Safehouse

By Michael Willner, David Ducharme, Sun Jeong, and Rachel Lynch

Safehouse is a 1v1, turn-based strategy board game based on the history of the Underground Railroad. One player controls the slaves hiding in the station master's home as they attempt to not be caught. The other player controls the slave hunter, searching for runaway slaves to take back to the South. The slave hunter has 10 turns to discover the hiding player within the board space. The safe house space is masked so the hunting player cannot see it, however the hiding player may move furniture and their own location to seek protection while the hunting player tries to discern their location in a limited number of turns.



Family or Foe?

By Anushka Potdar, Alfa Cao & Sydney Stojkovic

Family or Foe? is a collaborative storytelling roleplaying game in which 4–10 players try to escape slavery by moving on a historically accurate map of the US from the 1850s to try to reach a free state. Slave catcher cards must be drawn during the game, and determine if the players are captured, killed, resold, or remain safe and on the run. This game highlights both the influence of chance on fate and brutality of slavery, providing an emotional and experiential educational insight into the history of those seeking to escape slavery in the United States.

Figure 2. Images and descriptions of the four student games selected for public exhibition: *Guided*, *Combahee*, *Safehouse*, and *Family or Foe?*

it came to the design process for *Combahee*, my group researched the Combahee River Raid: Harriet Tubman's involvement, the purpose and events of the raid, the types of troops used, and the geography. After we finished our research on the raid, we then studied how other historical wargames used games as a medium to convey history.

We can see from the responses of these two students, both of whom worked on teams with games featured

in the exhibition, that some students, like Sarah did demonstrate critical media literacies in games. These students left the course having experienced some elements of transformation, while other students like Matthew describe an experience that is more focused on the informational. Both experiences of the course are valid and can be understood as successful. We can see evidence of these students' critical media literacies in their ability to articulate the self as politically situated in mediated culture, their ability to communicate across differences, to

analyze games through a range of perspectives beyond the instrumentalist, and to design a game reflecting this critical understanding of the medium, thus also pushing the medium forward, or making use of the friction afforded by Tubman.

For other students who exhibited resistance throughout the course or developed less conventionally successful artifacts, we can still see value in their engagement despite their discomfort. We also see value in the engagement of the facilitators as co-learners, even—sometimes—in our own discomfort. To develop the type of deep inclusion in media literacy teaching we discuss in this project, the teacher must also become included, learning alongside the students, while also maintaining the responsibility to provide a classroom space in which everyone is welcomed.

Our own identities as white female co-facilitators affected the experience of the course for both ourselves and our students. We are intersectional in how we perceive and relate to our identities in areas of both privilege and oppression. There were multiple ways this showed up throughout the course, especially considering institutional and structural contexts. In terms of gender dynamics, our course was predominantly male and there were consistent themes around participation and resistance related to gender representation in our course. Even while attempting to engage in dialogue and encourage understanding of others' experiences, there was often sexist resistance from male class members to accept our experiences as women even as the co-facilitators. We often felt pulled towards advocacy facilitation due to these responses, even while we were attempting to be multipartial. Additionally, our white racial identity had an affect on the overall course experience, especially throughout the Harriet Tubman project. We hold privilege within that identity as the institution is predominantly white, despite the racial and ethnic diversity we had in our course. We were conscious of our racialized ways of knowing and potential unconscious biases while engaging

in the Harriet Tubman project, and therefore may have projected more caution and sensitivity to the students around the subject matter than was perhaps needed and may have contributed to a lack of design risk-taking. In an awareness of our white identity, we worked to bring in readings and materials from Black perspectives and worked with Dr. Janell Hobson, a Black female scholar, who is an expert in Harriet Tubman's history. She came into the course as a guest lecturer and provided feedback on student work on the game designs in progress.

By centering our awareness of our identities and utilizing multipartial facilitation, we aimed to create a learning environment that was inclusive and supportive for all students, including our Black students. Utilizing dialogic pedagogy and multipartial facilitation allowed us to consistently process interactions within our class community throughout the course and gave space and a framework for us to interrupt harmful dynamics, slow down, and reflect as a class. We regularly reflected on and named the identity representation, and lack thereof, within our class community and dialogued about how that affected our experiences and interactions with one another. As facilitators, we were conscious of the labor being taken on by marginalized students and enacted power-balancing facilitation techniques to ensure all were a part of the dialogue and learning process. That being said, we acknowledge our limitations and our inability to fully prevent harm to any students within our class as well as the role of institutional and structural power dynamics present in the class which we have reflected on (Corron & Rouse, 2022).

Looking back, we see how bringing Tubman into our course functioned as a generative catalyst, pushing many "buttons" in the field in meaningful ways (see Figure 3).

In conclusion, through dialogue we ultimately increased the capacity of everyone in the course, students and co-facilitators, to engage in an uncomfortable design process, to critically examine games, and create a deep understanding of ourselves and others.

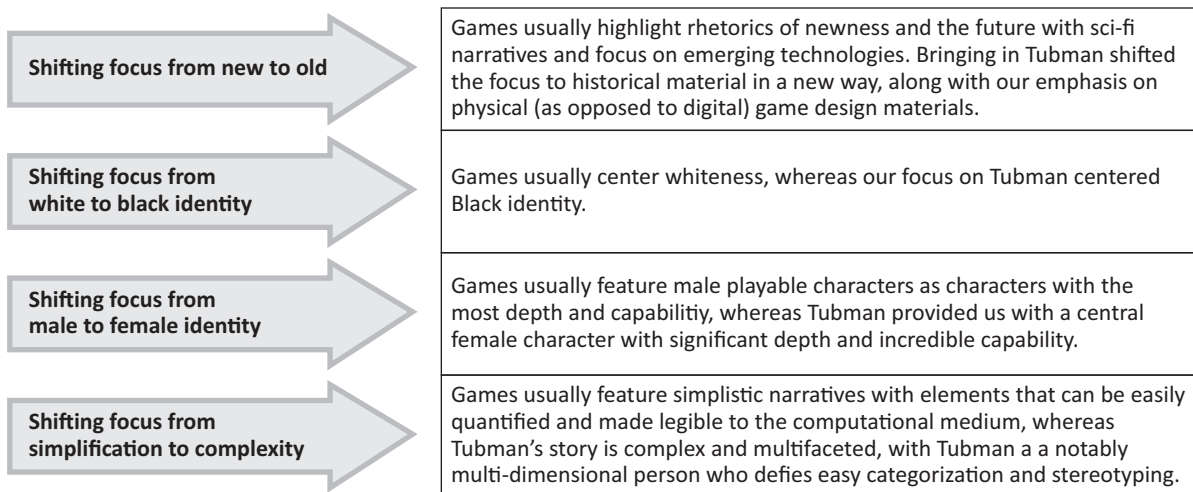


Figure 3. A series of powerful shifts, enabled by Tubman as a catalyst, in our games classroom.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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